

Attitudes, Values, and Aversions

by [Stephen M. Corey](#) - 1954

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ATTITUDES, VALUES, AND AVERSIONS DEFINED

The word "attitude" is here used to mean an emotionally colored tendency to behave in such a way as to imply support or rejection of some referent. In this sense an attitude is always "attached" to something. It never exists in the the abstract. Whether the attitude is protagonistic or antagonistic it always is related to some referent. We frequently ask the question, Does he have a good attitude? but when we do so we imply a referent even though we do not name it. We have in mind, as we ask the question, a "good attitude" toward something.

These referents are as varied as human experience. One referent toward which an attitude may be assumed might be a single individual—one's mother or father or President Eisenhower or the late Joseph Stalin. Another kind of referent is a group of people who tend to have—at least in our perceptions—something in common. We talk a great deal, for example, about attitudes toward Negroes, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Republicans, Democrats, the members of the United States Senate, or professors of education.

Still another kind of referent might be an institution and all that it implies to a particular person. He may have positive or negative attitudes toward American public education, the Supreme Court, or the Catholic Church. Then there is the kind of referent that is represented by particular practices, such as capital punishment or spanking children in the school or certain aspects of group dynamics. Referents can also be objects, such as a crucifix or a Chevrolet; or a cluster of ideas, such as those the individual understands are implied by the words "democracy" or "communism."

The variety of these referents, and the fact that most of us react either favorably or unfavorably toward them, merely call attention to our inveterate tendency to evaluate. Almost invariably, each experience we have—whether it is with a person or a group or an institution or an idea or a practice or an object—is evaluated in the sense that we feel favorably or unfavorably disposed toward it.

For the purpose of this discussion, those referents toward which an individual has a positive or favorable attitude constitute his values. This means that whatever the referent may be, he is disposed to behave so as to support it, or want to be in its presence, or imitate it, or have more of it, or approach it, or make sacrifices for it, or do whatever he can to assure its perpetuation.

This, I recognize, extends the meaning of the term "value" beyond that ordinarily understood. These

referents toward which the individual has positive or favorable attitudes might be sorted out in many ways. Some of them could be called "spiritual" and others "material." Some might be quite specific and others quite general. Some might be exceedingly ephemeral and others persistent throughout life. Be this as it may—and again for the purposes of this discussion—I am using the word "value" to designate all of those referents toward which an individual has positive or favorable or protagonistic attitudes.

I am using the word "aversion" to mean referents toward which the individual has negative or antagonistic attitudes. These referents the individual wants to destroy or to get away from or to undermine. The suggestion has been made that a better term than aversion might be "negative value," but this word seems to distort the basic meaning of "value," which by its very nature evokes positive and affirmative and supportive behavior.

A VALUE-AVERSION CONTINUUM

In explaining these conceptions about attitudes, values, and aversions, it has helped me to use a value-aversion continuum construct to describe at any moment in time the value-aversion status of a number of referents for a particular individual or for a group. For example, the following value-aversion continuum locates a limited number of values and aversions as they are perceived by a particular seventeen-year-old boy.

HIGHEST AVERSION STATUS		MODERATE AVERSION-VALUE STATUS		HIGHEST VALUE STATUS	
A	B	C	D	E	F
A	People who criticize his behavior		D	Company of his parents	
B	Cutting the lawn		E	Company of certain girls	
C	Studying		F	His car	

Locating these referents on a continuum calls attention to two fundamental dimensions of an attitude. One has to do with its valence—the attitude is either affirmative or negative in respect to the particular referent named. The other characteristic or dimension has to do with the intensity of the attitude. Those referents that are located at the far ends of the continuum are the ones in respect to which the individual has strong attitudes. The intensity of these attitudes implies a priority factor which everyone has undoubtedly observed as he has thought about his own behavior or has noticed the behavior of other people carefully. This seventeen-year-old boy, for example, would usually go to greater lengths to be with certain girls than to spend his free time with his parents. If he were faced with a decision, he would choose the girls for companions even though this might disappoint his parents. If the disappointment were extreme, however, and might result in certain punishments, other referents would need to be considered. Attitudes toward them would then be taken into account in predicting his behavior.

HIGHEST AVERSION STATUS			HIGHEST VALUE STATUS		
A	B	C	D	E	F
A	Communism		D	Public education	
B	Most government "interference" with business		E	Competition in business	
C	Labor unions		F	"The American Way"	

A number of years ago E. L. Thorndike, in some ingenious experiments, attempted to measure attitude intensity by determining what financial price an individual would pay in order to support or reject referents in respect to which he had formed positive or negative attitudes. The problems involved in measuring the intensity of attitudes have been studied a great deal by social psychologists. Thurstone, for example, developed during the thirties a number of scales which measured the strength of attitudes, or opinions, toward a long list of referents.

Not only is it theoretically possible to construct a value-aversion continuum for an individual at any moment in time, but the same thing can be done for a group. This is possible because the conception of a group means that its members have similar attitudes toward certain referents. I do not know very much about the National Association of Manufacturers, but the value-aversion continuum sketched out below is an attempt to locate some referents as their location might be inferred from the activities of the leaders of this association.

In the last analysis, the referents that an individual regards as values or aversions are inferred from his behavior—"behavior" being used in a broad sense to include both symbolic and non-symbolic activity. Most of the early studies of attitudes were based upon the assumption that verbally stated opinions were rather adequate indices of the way an individual, in his more overt behavior, would support certain referents (positive attitudes) or reject certain referents (negative attitudes). Subsequently a number of studies were conducted indicating the lack of relationship between verbal opinions and attitudes as inferred from behavior. A divergence is most apt to exist in respect to those referents toward which strong "public" attitudes exist. Under these circumstances we may have our private (real?) attitudes, which tend to be determinative of our behavior, as well as public attitudes, which are the ones we are willing to express in a group, which itself has strong attitudes.

SHIFTING VALUES AND AVERSIONS

Referring to the use of the value-aversion continuum, it should be understood that the location of referents on it is not static. Some referents may maintain a relatively fixed status in relation to many other referents throughout an individual's lifetime. Those people who have learned to ascribe high value status to "doing a good job," for example, may have much of their behavior affected by this referent over a long period. One of the objectives, of course, in character instruction is to stabilize at the extreme right or left end of the value-aversion continuum certain referents that will influence an individual's behavior for years.

Some referents, however, shift their position on the value-aversion continuum gradually or suddenly as a consequence of various factors. For example, whatever it is that a boy perceives in girls that causes him to assume a rather definite attitude toward them is differently perceived as he grows older. There is, consequently, a shift of this referent "girl" from rather decided aversion status along about age ten, eleven, or twelve, to high value status at age seventeen or eighteen. Similarly, the attitudes of college students toward the referent "war" underwent considerable change during the period 1938-1944. "Food" as a referent may shift rapidly from a value to an aversion as hunger is satisfied. After three days of total and involuntary starvation the referent "food" has highest priority for a normal human being. A starving man will do whatever he perceives necessary in order to get food, even though it causes him to neglect or violate many of the values that he thought important at other times.

These referents that I am calling values or aversions do not, of course, exist solely as discrete and individual items, but more frequently in constellations or galaxies. For example, as the referent

"girl" shifts for the growing boy from aversion to value status, many other referents that are associated in his perceptions with girls take on value status too. I have in mind things like combing the hair, washing the hands, eating food with some daintiness, making introductions properly, and dressing neatly. If parents and teachers were constantly aware of this "galaxy" phenomenon they might save themselves a great deal of anxiety. Less effort would be spent trying to get boys to attend to cleanliness or to their personal appearance before any interest has developed in girls. It is this latter interest which makes personal appearance as well as more conventional manners have value for them.

INCOMPATIBILITIES AMONG VALUES AND AVERSIONS

There are, inevitably, many incompatibilities in the value-aversion system of an individual or of a group. Whatever behavior is perceived by the individual as necessary to support certain values may also result in supporting certain aversions. Anyone can think of specific instances of these incompatibilities. At a relatively insignificant level there may be continuous conflict between what an individual perceives he must do in order to support the value of staying in bed late in the morning and yet not behave so as to support the aversion of having a bad reputation for punctuality.

A more frustrating and significant kind of conflict is observable in those individuals or groups in America who want consistently to support Christian values, and at the same time are exceedingly patriotic. Behavior in support of certain Christian values means that man loves his fellow men, forgives his enemies, and leaves vengeance to the Lord. Strong patriotism, on the other hand, periodically may require behavior that involves killing one's enemies, destroying their institutions, and wreaking vengeance whenever possible.

Many believe that one of the most serious problems that beset our contemporaneous culture is this incompatibility among professed values. The conflict that ensues creates anxieties and uncertainties, and frequently results in aggressive behavior or flight from reality.

LEARNING VALUES AND AVERSIONS

Going back for a moment to the schematic value-aversion continuum, many factors determine the locus of referents as a partial description of the value-aversion system of an individual or a group. Whether or not an institution or a practice or an idea or an object is reacted to with a favorable or an unfavorable attitude depends upon the relationship the individual sees between this referent and his total existing value-aversion system. If he considers the activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy to have exceedingly high value status, and if he has experience with some idea or person or group or practice which causes him to perceive it as closely and positively related to the Senator, this new referent will have value status for him.

This description of the way values and aversions are learned seems simple and it also appears to be in accord with the facts. We learn to have favorable, positive attitudes toward those referents that we believe are associated positively with the values we now hold. We learn antagonistic attitudes toward those referents that we perceive as related to aversions that we already have learned.

GENESIS OF A VALUE-AVERSION SYSTEM

The way a value-aversion system seems to grow is illustrated in the case of a new-born baby. So far as we know, the "innate" values and aversions of a newborn child are few in number. Pain is an aversion, as are all other types of physical discomfort. The most important value is probably food.

Whatever referents become associated in the experience of the new-born infant with food will gradually assume value status. If a particular referent is associated not only with food but with the reduction of physical discomfort as well, this referent will take on value status more rapidly. Whatever referents are experienced by the child in association with physical discomfort will tend to take on the aversion status that the child already ascribes to physical discomfort. Over the course of time the child's mother is almost always associated in a supporting way with his existing values. She protects him and comforts him and praises him and feeds him and nurses his hurts and lets him rail at her when he must. Her positive relationship to his existing values is continuously reinforced, and thus her value status is enhanced. Whether or not what the mother does is really good for the child is not the point. The mother becomes a value for him when he perceives her as engaging in activities which are positively related to his existing values.

This description of the way in which values and aversions are learned may not frequently be raised to a conscious level and talked about, but it is taken advantage of by anyone who sets out to change the value-aversion system of other people. This is a rather constant aspiration of many newspaper writers, churchmen, parents, school officials, CIO officials, and a host of other individuals and groups. What must be done is quite straightforward. First, find out as much as you can about the existing value-aversion system of the individuals or groups you want to influence. Next, try to get them to associate certain referents with their existing values and certain other referents with their existing aversions. When these two things are done skillfully the individual or the group will believe or reject whatever it is that you have decided should be believed or rejected.

The following illustration from an editorial makes this procedure rather clear:

The extensive use of machines, in all industrial operations, is the American way. The great captains of industry in the nineteenth century, with a courage and resourcefulness that overcame all obstacles, have given us, their heirs, freedom from fear of want and material things far in excess of the wildest dreams of our grandfathers. We have leisure time for recreation and the means to indulge our every wish. Serf-like dependence upon handicraft is a thing of the Dark Ages.

This editorial writer wanted his readers to value the extensive use of machines. He therefore associates this referent with "the American way," an over-all value that is rarely defined but is usually assumed to be highly desirable. Then he further associates the extensive use of machines with value referents like captains of industry, courage, resourcefulness, overcoming of obstacles, freedom from fear, material things, and time for recreation. Then, as a final clincher, the opposite of "the extensive use of machines"—handicraft—is related to aversions—serfdom and the Dark Ages.

To illustrate the way referents become values or aversions in another context, let us consider the customs of two wholly imaginary New Guinea tribes—the Womanns and the Kwomanns. The Womanns expose to the elements (and hence kill) the babies they do not want. Little attention is paid to the paternity of children. Women generally take the sexual initiative. It is common for the Australian colonial police to employ the Womanns to spy on other tribes and collect taxes. Physically the Womanns are dirty. They are extremely superstitious. They tend to be short, squat, and heavy, and many of them are drug addicts. Their agricultural practices are primitive. They barely scratch the earth, and because they are thriftless they live in a state of partial starvation. It is their custom to kill without warning any strangers who are found wandering about the jungles in which they live.

Now for the Kwomanns. They are exceedingly tender and affectionate toward their children and manifest an unusually stable family life. In their personal habits they are frugal and hard-working.

They are also independent and self-reliant, and have been known in many instances to resist strenuously the attempts of the Australian colonial police to collect taxes. Part of their daily ritual includes bathing. For a primitive people they are remarkably free from superstitions. Physically they are tall, slender, and graceful, and, with the aforesaid exception of their attitude toward the Australian colonial police, they are kind and hospitable to strangers.

Remember these two tribes are entirely fictitious. Assume, however, that the person describing them wanted middle-class Americans to value the Kwomanns and regard the Womanns with aversion. He probably would be quite successful in achieving this objective. The reason, of course, is that the alleged characteristics of the Kwomanns are consistent with many of the important values of middle-class Americans; the alleged characteristics of the Womanns are consistent with their aversions. I should like to emphasize again that the things said about these tribes might or might not be true or might or might not be complete. If, however, they are perceived as true by middle-class Americans, the attitudes of these Americans toward the tribes might safely be predicted.

Two quite different methods can be used to teach attitudes, values, and aversions. Using one method, a teacher or an editor or a motion picture producer or an advertiser will first decide what referents he believes should be valued or regarded as aversions by the group or individual he is trying to influence. Then, using whatever procedures and techniques he believes are safe, he will try to relate the referents he wants valued with existing values, and the referents he wants regarded as aversions with existing aversions. This method means that someone else decides what another person should believe, and then proceeds to try to teach him this belief.

The second method is based upon different assumptions and involves (1) providing the individual with as rich a variety of experience with the referent as possible, and (2) helping him to figure out for himself in what way this new referent is related to his existing value-aversion system.

TEACHING VALUES AND AVERSIONS TO CHILDREN

As boys and girls in school appraise their experiences and ascribe a value or an aversion status to a great variety of referents, they face many difficulties because of their immaturity. For one thing, they are less apt to be aware of some over-all criteria or of some comprehensive values or aversions that often help mature people make decisions as to what they want to support or attack. An illustration of one of these super values might be the Golden Rule, or the principle of consistency. Teachers who are concerned with the values and aversions learned by children can often help them develop some principles which will enable them to appraise more intelligently not only their existing values and aversions but also the relationship between this system and their experiences with new referents.

It is true, too, of children—and by "children" I mean all immature people—that they are less apt to anticipate conflict in what they do in supporting their values or opposing their aversions. Some children like orange juice, but they have an allergy to it. Consequently, shortly after the orange juice has been drunk they break out in a rash. Many children, however, find it difficult to relate the value "orange juice" with the aversion "rash." Too much time intervenes. Similarly, many adults value whatever it is that the consumption of liquor does to them, despite the fact that they wake up the next morning after a drinking bout with a headache which makes them feel most uncomfortable. The ability to anticipate the consequences of behavior that supports some present value develops gradually and is obviously an exceedingly important one.

It is true, too, that children are less apt than adults to intellectualize and verbalize about their values and aversions. By intellectualizing and verbalizing I do not mean memorizing slogans and rules and principles of behavior. I have in mind instead the desirability of many opportunities for boys and girls to express themselves to their peers and discuss the possible consequences of behavior as it relates to their attitudes, values, and aversions.

Children are quite apt to accept systems of values and aversions that are recommended to them, without examining very critically the relationship between these systems and their own welfare. In respect to many referents, for example, the attitudes of children are much like those of their parents. This means that it is relatively easy to mislead and indoctrinate children in respect to their beliefs. Teachers can help them become more independent by providing opportunities for them to experiment with their behavior and weigh the consequences.

It is rather generally known by social psychologists that the relationship between verbal information about a referent and an attitude toward it that influences behavior is not necessarily close. This is especially true in the case of children. Merely learning information, for example, about democracy does not necessarily change behavior in the sense that it will increasingly support democratic practices.

1 This discussion was used by Arthur W. Foshay, Kenneth D. Wann, and Associates as a basis for Chapter 2, "Our Ideas About Social Values," in their book *Children's Social Attitudes*, which was published in 1954 by the Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University.

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